



Connected leading for connected knowing: A distributed leadership perspective for community engagement

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Summary

American higher education's efforts for the public good through community engagement depend on leadership (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Because of their resources, roles, decision-making authority, and imputed trust, executive leaders are positioned to significantly affect community engagement development (Sandmann & Plater, 2009). Nevertheless, studies suggest grassroots and collective leadership can better advance community engagement (Kezar, Gallant, & Lester, 2012; Plater, 2011).

Research on distribution of leadership in the K-12 context shows positive effects on aspects such as student outcomes and school culture (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2007; Spillane, 2006). However, little is known about the phenomenon in higher education.

We conjecture that distributed leadership warrants consideration and application as a conceptual framework for leadership in decentralized organizations like higher education institutions. Distributed leadership's differentiation between numerical and concertive action (Gronn, 2000) and three indicators – the multiplicity of actors, leadership roles, and leadership behaviors (Robinson, 2009) – provide a promising tool for understanding interactions, networks, and the nature and patterns of distribution of leadership in community engagement.

The researchers examined responses to three selected foundational questions in the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification application framework (CFAT, 2010). With institutional permission, we acquired 224 successful Carnegie applications from the 2008 and 2010 rounds, through the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE). First, the data suggest that leadership practice is multilayered, involving formal and informal leaders. Second, the data reveal primarily rhetorical leadership practices at the executive level, such as delivering public speeches and serving on boards and committees. Last, the data indicate that the executive leadership employs substantive strategies of financial support, personnel policy, strategic planning, and structural configuration for integrating community engagement into various operational aspects of the institution.

The foundation of distributed leadership – that people lead when and where they have expertise – makes sense in community-engaged leadership, where *how* leadership activities are enacted matters. Future inquiry is needed on the relationships among accountability structures and patterns of community-engagement leadership, leaders' morality and positionality, and leadership succession and community engagement's implementation and advancement.

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